Amendments to the Claims

The following listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

Claims 1-10 (Canceled).

Claim 11 (Currently amended): A retractor comprising:

a shaft including at least one flexible portion;

a plurality of inflatable bladders partially circumscribing an outer surface of the shaft, at least one of the inflatable bladders being disposed about the at least one flexible portion of the shaft and being configured to ~~cause at least a section of the at least one flexible portion of the shaft to become more rigid when the at least one inflatable bladder is inflated~~ transition from an uninflated state to an inflated state, whereupon the at least one flexible portion of the shaft is rendered rigid upon inflation of the at least one inflatable bladder; and

a cannula having a passage which receives the shaft to deploy the bladder at a target site in tissue.

Claim 12 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 11, wherein the at least one inflatable bladder is shaped so that it expands into an eccentric shape when inflated by fluid pressure introduced through the shaft.

Claim 13 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 12, wherein the at least one inflatable bladder does not substantially stretch when fully inflated.

Claim 14 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 11, wherein the at least one inflatable bladder operates at inflation pressure from 10 mmHg to 1000 mmHg.

Claim 15 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 14, wherein the at least one inflatable bladder operates at inflation pressure from 100 mmHg to 1000 mmHg.

Claim 16-21 (Canceled).

Claim 22 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 11, wherein the plurality of inflatable bladders is eccentrically mounted on the shaft.

Claim 23 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 11, wherein the plurality of inflatable bladders includes at least two inflatable bladders that abut each other.

Claim 24 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 11, wherein the plurality of inflatable bladders is axially spaced along the shaft.

Claim 25 (Currently amended): A retractor comprising:

a shaft including at least one flexible portion;

a plurality of inflatable bladders partially circumscribing an outer surface of the shaft, each inflatable bladder having an eccentric configuration, at least one of the inflatable bladders being disposed about the at least one flexible portion such that a section of the at least one flexible portion becomes more rigid upon inflation of the at least one inflatable bladder and

being configured to transition from an uninflated state to an inflated state, whereupon the at least one flexible portion of the shaft is rendered rigid upon inflation of the at least one inflatable bladder, wherein the plurality of inflatable bladders includes at least two inflatable bladders that abut each other; and

a cannula having a passage which receives the shaft to deploy the bladder at a target site in tissue.

Claim 26 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 25, wherein the plurality of inflatable bladders is eccentrically mounted on the shaft.

Claim 27 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 25, wherein the plurality of inflatable bladders is axially spaced along the shaft.

Claim 28 (Currently amended): A retractor comprising:

a shaft adapted to transition from a first condition, in which the shaft includes at least one flexible portion, to a second condition, in which the at least one flexible portion is rendered rigid;

a plurality of bladders at least partially circumscribing an outer surface of the shaft, each bladder in the plurality of bladders abutting at least one other bladder and selectively inflatable for transitioning a portion of the shaft from the first condition to the second condition; and

a cannula having a passage extending therethrough that is configured to receive the shaft.

Claim 29 (Previously presented): A retractor as in claim 28, wherein the shaft decreases in flexibility as it transitions from the first condition to the second condition.